

Spirit of the Games

Saturday, July 8, 2000

Larry Hughes

Spirit of the Games, 2000 Style

"If better is possible, then good isn't enough." That's the personal philosophy of Marine Corps veteran Larry Hughes, 51, of Columbia, Md., our Spirit of the Games winner this year.

A Class IV paraplegic, injured by shrapnel in Vietnam, Hughes is a familiar face at the field events at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG). He is the United States national record holder in discus, javelin and shot-put, a world record holder, and a 1996 Paralympic gold medalist. This year, he heads for Sydney, Australia to defend that title. According to Hughes, his many achievements bring personal satisfaction to be sure, but also reassure him that hard work does prevail, and his philosophy holds true.

"I'm not disabled, just inconvenienced," Hughes says, although this was not always the case. After his injury, he had a "cloud hanging over my head, like many veterans go through, with the feeling you have nothing to offer in life, like you're an outcast. In 1976, the bug bit me." He started road racing and went on to do a 367-mile marathon in Alaska—twice. Since then, he's run more than 20 marathons and numerous other races. He still gets in his race chair regularly as part of his cross training, along with weights and biometrics, and he teaches others about those techniques. "Helping others learn makes me feel good, makes me feel motivational," Hughes says. "But there are guys here that also motivate me—they fill up my tank!"



Although he also plays basketball and billiards, Hughes' primary focus has been on field events for the past 17 years. He first competed at the NVWG in 1985, and has been a frequent participant ever since. (He is here this week once again with the 12-member "Capitol Cruisers" team from Baltimore.) "These Games are special because they give you the enthusiasm to learn and become better. Here, you need to take the knowledge to heart. There's more of a mentoring process here, from coach to athlete, and from athlete to athlete. There's a 'passing of the torch' that goes on."

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Hughes shares his knowledge openly and often, but he motivates by demonstrating strong competition and skill. This week, he helped run a special training clinic on field events to show the ropes to new athletes. “For me, the Games are not just something to do, but something that’s very competitive. And, I say this with a great deal of honor and belief—my goal is to beat everybody I come in contact with! Because that way, when they leave here and go home, they’ll also start to do something about it . . . that’s what got me started.”

“When people come to the Games or get started in wheelchair sports, they become better individuals and know they have something to offer, and that’s the most important thing,” Hughes says. “Having friends helps a great deal, and coming here where the camaraderie is, it helps you do better and gets you competitive as well. You’ve got to share your techniques and your secrets with everyone.”

Larry Hughes was nominated by three different coaches for this year’s Spirit Award, who use words like, “always helpful to the other athletes,” “provides instruction and encouragement,” “role model,” “strong work ethic,” and “excellent spokesman.” According to Tom Brown, National Event Director, “Larry was one of the motivators to help us try an educational component to the Games this year, and he volunteered to come out early to teach the clinic for novice athletes in discus, shot-put and javelin, and then motivate them to go on to events outside the Games. He’s always been a leader who tries to show the other athletes how to do things the proper way and inspire them to try to do the very best they can.”

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Bruce Scott, PVA Sports Director, agrees. “Larry is a Paralympic athlete who won a gold medal in Atlanta—after he broke his elbow! At each of the Games he takes time to help the other athletes. Back home, he’s very active in wheelchair sports in the Baltimore area. An elite athlete, he has been supporting the development of wheelchair sports in his community for years. He is a good representative of both PVA and VA.”

“Having other athletes recognize you and believe in you—your own peers—that is the greatest achievement you can have at the ‘Vet Games’,” Hughes says. “You are able to carry friendships back after the Games. There’s the comedy of it all, the tragedy of it all, the winning and the excitement of it all — there’s so many aspects of life right here. I know that amusement parks have many great rides—but this is one hell of a ride right here at the Vet Games!”

Final Reminders

Cell phone turn in:

Please turn your cell phones in to the Command Center, Rm. 211, Convention Center, at the following times: **Sat. July 8 until 7:00 p.m.; Sun. July 9, 9:00 - 11:00 a.m.** If you have a special need that requires you to turn in your equipment at a later time, contact

Marshall Mayes at 669-8453 or by radio on **private 8453**. Please have all equipment (radio/phone, carrier, battery charger and extra batteries, if issued) with you.

Please return your DME to conference room 13 when you check out of your room.



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A special thanks to the many public affairs officers, photographers, veterans, volunteers and others who made this publication possible. Have a safe trip home. — Jan Northstar

TRANSPORTATION

SUNDAY, JULY 9

6:00 AM - 4:00 PM

AIRPORT SHUTTLE

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